

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 119:1-8
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

To begin, I want to reassure you that I'm not going to preach about divorce today, and I'm not going to preach about hell—so please relax.

What I do want to talk about today is relationship, because this part of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount has a lot to do with the importance of being in right relationship—both with God, and with each other. He's talking about ways in which we do or do not live in healthy, mutual support for one another.

Before getting to that, though, let's look at some history. In the past, this section of the Sermon on the Mount has given rise to some anti-semitism, and supersessionism. Supersessionism is your theological term for the day. It is the idea that Christianity, and the New Testament supersede, or take the place of Judaism and the Old Testament, and it was a common attitude for biblical commentators to have, even 20 years ago. Today supersessionism is a big no-no. Seminary professors will fail your supersessionist essay, because it would show a fundamental misunderstanding of who Jesus is. For instance, supersessionists would say that in today's gospel, Jesus is replacing the law with his own ideas, but that is not the case. Jesus himself says, "I come not to abolish, but to *fulfill* the law." And actually, in this passage he is bringing his listeners *back* to their roots, back to the law of Moses, and strengthening it with his insight.

Even by preaching on a mountain, Jesus is reminding his listeners of the way that the Jewish law first came to them: remember Moses went up to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the laws from God. In fact, mountains have always been places where the Jews worshiped, and met God. So preaching this sermon on a mountain is an important way of showing us that Jesus's sermon is not in conflict with the law, but is in continuity

with its traditions. And he's not just repeating the law, but is reinforcing it with his examples.

In the first example, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'" And notice that he's not contradicting this; murdering is wrong.

Jesus continues, "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." By adding this second part, Jesus reveals meaning that we may not have heard at first. It's not *only* murder that's wrong. It's also name-calling, insulting, and reactionary anger—because they can lead to the falling out with one another that leads to murder.

Also anger, insults, and bullying devalue human life, and fail to recognize that spark of the Divine that is in everyone. How many times have we heard that a person shot someone, or shot many people, because they felt insulted, felt alienated, or felt disrespected? Jesus wants us to see that even disrespect and anger are damaging to the life he wants us to lead. So, it's not *just* murder that's bad. It's anything that trivializes human life, and breaks down the relationships we have with one another. You see, Jesus is not saying "out with the old law and in with a new." He's saying, "yes, the law—AND this, as well."

Then Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Again, Jesus is not saying that the old law against adultery is wrong; he's saying adultery is wrong, AND there's even more to it than that. He's saying that focusing on a woman (or a man, for that matter) purely as a sex object breaks down any respect for their humanity and divinity that you should have for them. People are more than sex objects. But the part about tearing out your eye or cutting off your hand is Jesus simply being extreme in

order to make a point. He's saying that we might not be able to help what pops into our minds about a person, but we shouldn't give it space—we should pluck it out, or cut it off— if it's purely lust.

And then Jesus says, "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'." Again, he's talking about relationships. As followers of Jesus, we should be believed because we always tell the truth; because truth-telling is important in healthy relationships that work. Jesus tells his followers here that what a person says should always be the truth, so we have no need of swearing by oaths. When you say a thing is true, people should be able to believe you. If you say something is false, then it is false. That's not to say that we shouldn't take an oath in court. But that it shouldn't require an oath to make us *tell* the truth.

So we can see that Jesus broadens the law, augments the law, and fulfills the law. He doesn't do away with it. He's not a supersessionist. The season of Epiphany is about realizing the presence of God, and who God is; Jesus reveals who God really is. God is love, a love that wants us to live together in caring relationships with one another. Jesus says anything that gets in the way of that: anger, disrespect, lust, dishonesty, should simply be avoided.

Amen

The Rev. Melanie Lewis
Rector
Christ Church Millwood